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ABSTRACT

To better understand the economic aspects of early Florida and to gain an understanding of the continuity of history and economics, students analyze the economic origins and evolution of St. Augustine, Florida, the oldest city in the United States. This lesson plan involves taking the students on a field trip to St. Augustine where they form teams and research the economic history of the city as both an historical and economic topic. Students share their findings through a class presentation and write a paper for the instructor. The lesson plan provides a rationale; cites goals and objectives; describes procedures; discusses content; and covers evaluation. (Contains a 42-item bibliography.) (BT)

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Foundation for Teaching Economics

# *Old Money: Economic History of St. Augustine*
# Lesson Plan

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# Old Money: Economic History of St. Augustine

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## ABSTRACT

In order to better understand the economic aspects of early Florida and to gain an understanding of the continuity of history and of economics, the students analyzed the economic origins and evolution of St. Augustine, Florida, America's oldest city.

I teach two 11th grade American history classes to 42 students and a 12th grade economics class of 40 students, the best students from the 13 high schools in the north half of Dade county. All are either honors or advanced placement students and are dual enrolled at Miami-Dade Community College North Campus. They are exceptionally bright, with stanines of seven or better, but have generally not been challenged to their full potential in the standard high school setting.

For the past three years I have taken my juniors on a field trip to historic St. Augustine. Often, some seniors who did not go in their junior year also attend. To develop a project which would involve both grades, I allowed the students to form teams with or without members of other classes or grades. Seniors who had already gone were used as resources and mentors. Before, during, and after the trip, the students researched the economic history of St. Augustine as both an economic and historical topic. They then shared their findings with the class by means of a presentation, and to me by a written product. In this, I encouraged them to use their imaginations beyond the conventional research paper. Assessment was based on the originality and accuracy of the material and the presentation.

## RATIONALE

History is best studied in person, and a hands-on approach is quite desirable. IN south Florida, we have limited access to historical sites, either archaeological Indian sites or a century or less old. We can not go to colonial British, Revolutionary, or Civil War sites easily. We can, however, visit St. Augustine and

walk through four centuries of history.

In St. Augustine, the students are exposed to many types of history: architectural, military, cultural, social, political and economic. The last is usually not articulated as such, but when the origins and continued existence of the city are examined, it is only through economics that is explicable. The students had to think critically in order to see the distinctions and continuing threads of the city's history. To this end, they had to do research in various libraries in the area and, in so doing, developed search strategies and formed hypotheses.

To their surprise, the students found parallels in St. Augustine's history to Miami's and to the state and nation in general. They were able to discover for themselves that local history is larger history in microcosm.

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## GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

During the study of the Spanish colonial period, the students came to understand the process by which the Spanish crown financed itself by shipping gold, silver, and gems from its New World colonies. To safeguard the plate fleets from pirates, to rescue ship-wrecked sailors, and to deny the land to the French and British, the Spanish founded St. Augustine, a city not started for reasons of freedom or religion, but for the basic economic reason of protecting their specie.

Despite early hopes and dreams, the colony never returned as much on Spain's investment of time, money, and men as the Crown had hoped.

The students, then, were to examine several different economic questions about St. Augustine's continued existence. How had St. Augustine survived the neglect of the Spanish? How had it survived the various wars that had raged around and through it, disturbing its limited productivity and trade? What part did financiers and moneylenders play in a town with limited abilities to meet its obligations when investors are motivated by profit? What was the effect of changing hands so many times? Economic stability was never assured, so how did the citizens of St. Augustine continue to make a living and the government continue to collect taxes? Did the economy of the city shift over time or remain static? The concepts of costs and benefits come into consideration as to why the city remained.

With these in mind, the students sought to find how and why St. Augustine survived. They found how marginal analysis worked in St. Augustine's history and how changing land and building utilization have played a vital role in an economy that had to adapt or perish.

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## PROCEDURES

Two weeks before the field trip, I described the project as I envisioned it. I reviewed what we had studied of the Spanish encomienda and hacienda systems of exploitation for agricultural colonies, as opposed to the mining techniques in the areas that produced precious metals and stones. They were then to organize themselves into teams, and I encouraged juniors and seniors to work together, as the juniors were fresher with the historical material and the seniors had the benefit of an economics background. They were then to research the sources themselves, with my guidance and assistance, and come to their own decisions as to what the best answer would be to the riddle of St. Augustine's survival with no natural resources. They were then to convey their conclusions to the class by way of class presentations, which I would videotape so that all classes could see the results, as most teams were formed between classes. Some teams did skits, some gave conventional lectures, and some made video tapes, one of which is attached. Their printed submissions came in the form of conventional research papers, diaries, letters, magazines, and comic books. The due date was two weeks after we returned from the field trip.

During the intervening time, I consulted with many individuals and groups. While not influencing them towards one conclusion or another, I guided them to sources on the questions as well as to monographs on the subject. I did not require a typed paper in order to give them more latitude in creativity.

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## CONTENT

Spanish milled dollars, a specific form of specie to reduce counterfeiting or shaving, were the major form of money in the New World. More properly called doubloons, cobs, reals, or 'pieces of eight', these provided both the source of Spanish wealth and of its downfall because of the inflation that the introduction of so much specie into the market caused.

As Spanish plate fleets carrying the gold and silver ingot cruised north past the Florida coast on their return to the Iberian peninsula, two dangers awaited them: hurricanes and pirates. Hurricanes could neither be prevented nor avoided, so it was necessary to make provisions to salvage as many lives and cargoes from the wrecks as possible. Pirates, however, were a threat the Spanish could deal with, and to that end established a colony at St. Augustine to fulfil both missions. It was not intended to be profitable in itself, but the revenues saved would justify its costs. Rather than taxing the inhabitants, the crown would instead give them a subsidy in order to devote time to their duties rather than in daily subsistence activities.

Such was not to be, however, as the Spanish empire collapsed. As expected emoluments were received sporadically, the St. Augustines were forced into coastal trade and small-scale farming, along with hunting and fishing, to eke out their existence. The Castillo de San Marcos, the main defense of St. Augustine, also became the focus of economic activity as the city changed hands. With a sand bar blocking the entrance to the harbor, development as a seaport could never take place, precluding heavy trade. Experiments were tried with orange groves and other cash crops on the mainland, as well as livestock ranching, but none worked on a large enough scale for long enough to be marketable.

Eventually, St. Augustine survived long enough that its very antiquity became its industry. The oldest house, which had been in turn a tavern and an inn, became a museum. The Castillo went from fort to prison to ruin to national monument. Henry Flagler built the most luxurious hotels, which in turn have become a college, a museum, government and private offices, and retail shops. The versatility of building utilization is eloquent testimony to the adaptability, resourcefulness, and imagination of the people of St. Augustine. Marginal operations were either adapted to new market requirements or they failed. Scarce resources, particularly land, have been allocated by the use of entrepreneurship.

And yet there is still a sense of blindness to the uniqueness that has made St. Augustine survive. There is now a movement to replace the Lions' Bridge with a more modern, efficient span. Many feel that this is the only way to cure the rush hour traffic in St. Augustine. Others believe that it would seriously impair the city's image as a care-taker of the past. As has been so often true in St. Augustine's history, only time will tell.

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## EVALUATION

The students' papers were judged primarily on the content, with special focus on their comprehension of the issues involved in St. Augustine's survival and how original their presentations were. Further consideration of their mastery of the information was evidenced as %84 of the seniors displayed a greater comprehension of previously discussed economic concepts after having seen them in action historically, based upon pre- and post- testing. Similarly, some %93 of the juniors showed a marked improvement in their critical thinking skills and integration of historical data into trends in following tests and research assignments.

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## SUMMARY

My students came to the project with mixed economic backgrounds, both academically and experientially. They come from economically middle to lower class families, and many have been on free transportation and lunches. They are

an ethnically diverse group, and the School for Advanced Studies is the most racially balanced in the country.

As their children investigated the assignment, the students' parents also began to take more interest in Florida history, particularly the economic aspects. Their parents further expressed surprise at the richness and diversity of the sources. Most parents had never heard of them and were pleased to know that their children were getting this insight into Florida and how history and economics interact.

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